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SUBJECT: FM ZEBARI ON DISPUTE WITH IRAN, PM'S CAIRO TRIP,
SYRIA

REF: BAGHDAD 3334

Classified By: A/DCM Gary A. Grappo, for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: FM Zebari told A/DCM December 23 that while the Iraqi side did not want to escalate the situation with Iran regarding the contested oil well in Fakka field, he had told Iranian FM Mottaki, in a "tough" conversation, that the Iranian move represented a "clear provocation. Zebari reported that PM Maliki was pleased with his short visit to Cairo, where he had a good meeting with President Mubarak. Zebari pointed to two key internal Iraqi developments -- Iraq's recent passage of an election law and the holding of the second round of oil bids -- that were having a positive impact in the region and bolstering efforts to encourage more engagement with Iraq. Regarding relations with Syria, Zebari said he did not expect any improvement before the elections, given that the Syrians anticipated that a number of Iraqi political figures with Syrian backing would do very well, putting Syria in a stronger position to deal with a new Iraqi government. Zebari welcomed the return visit of NEA A/S Feltman in late January to chair the American side of the Diplomatic Joint Coordinating Committee. END SUMMARY.

A TOUGH CONVERSATION WITH THE IRANIANS

¶2. (C) Iraqi FM Zebari told A/DCM December 23 that he had had a tough conversation with Iranian FM Mottaki regarding the contested oil well in Fakka field, Maysan Province (reftel), telling his counterpart that the Iranian move represented a "clear provocation" aimed at "undermining" Iraqi sovereignty. He had also told Mottaki that Iran's action was causing it damage with neighboring countries in the region and was undermining its support among Iraqi Shia. Zebari said he had urged the Iranians to withdraw completely from Iraqi territory and pointed out to Mottaki that Iraqi maps clearly indicate the well is within Iraqi territory, a fact well established since the 1970's. According to Zebari, Mottaki had acknowledged Zebari had "made a good case."

GOI DESIRE NOT TO ESCALATE

¶3. (C) Zebari told A/DCM the Iraqi side did not want to escalate the situation and complained that certain elements in Iraq had politicized the issue. The FM said he had tried to make the point that people getting up in arms about the Iranian violation should be truthful and acknowledge similar border disputes with Turkey and Syria, but they (by implication, Sunni political players) were not doing so. Zebari said the Iranians most recent response to the MFA indicated a desire to resolve the issue diplomatically, outside the glare of media. Zebari also conceded to A/DCM that the area has been an issue for some time and that Baghdad has been aware that Tehran does not recognize Iraq's claim over it. The FM wondered whether the Iranian incursion may not have been a clumsy attempt by Tehran to re-open bilateral discussions over contested border areas. The FM asserted that Egyptian President Mubarak had raised the issue

(while the Iraqis were in Cairo) to Iranian Speaker Larijani, telling him Iran was "creating enemies" with such actions.

BACKGROUND ON DEMARCATION EFFORT

14. (C) Regarding the on again-off again bilateral effort to have technical teams demarcate the border, Zebari said it had taken three years to convince the Iranian side to do the demarcation. The Iranians had for a sustained period stuck to their position that the 1975 Algiers Accord provided all the detail that was needed with regard to the border. Zebari Qthe detail that was needed with regard to the border. Zebari acknowledged that the Iraqis had reservations about that Accord, noting that it had been abrogated and reinstated in the past. Those uncertainties, in tandem with its origins during Saddam's era, had undermined the Accord's legitimacy to a significant extent in Iraq. About a year ago, after a Zebari visit to Tehran, the Iranian side had agreed to a joint technical team that would demarcate the border. The effort had not been mounted because the Iraqi Ministry of Finance had never allocated the half million dollars needed for the Iraqi team.

PM'S TRIP TO CAIRO VIEWED AS A SUCCESS

15. (C) Zebari told A/DCM that PM Maliki was pleased with his trip to Cairo, where he had met with Mubarak for about an hour. He admitted that the visit had been "a bit short." (NOTE: According to Zebari Special Assistant Qusay al-Qubaisi a scheduled Maliki meeting with Omar Sulieman had been canceled without explanation. Qubaisi also alluded to

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some degree of GOI sensitivity about the PM's relatively light agenda in Cairo.) Mubarak had asked his FM to plan to visit Baghdad soon to follow up on the visit and had said that Egypt wanted to be helpful as Iraq made efforts to re-integrate in the region, said Zebari. The Iraqi FM described the visit as the culmination of intense diplomatic effort by the Iraq-Egypt Joint Commission, at technical levels and senior deputies level, which had involved a dozen ministries on each side. There had been numerous bilateral visits and exchanges preceding the visit, including by business people. Egyptian FM Aboul Gheit and Arab League SYG Amre Moussa had also been strongly supportive of the visit. Six ministers accompanied Maliki to Cairo.

ELECTIONS LAW, OIL BID ROUND, HELPING IRAQ'S IMAGE

16. (C) Zebari pointed to two key internal Iraqi developments that were having a tremendously positive impact in the region and more widely: Iraq's recent passage of an election law and the holding of the second round of oil bids. The first development had sent the message that Iraqis could compromise politically and resolve their differences in the political arena, in ways that promised more robust democratic development. The second oil round had demonstrated great transparency and communicated to the entire world that the Iraqis were not hostage to the Americans but were moving forward to develop their country in an independent and responsible manner. He said that in light of these developments, his recent efforts with Arab officials to encourage more engagement with Iraq had gotten more traction. He had made the point that Iraq's non-Arab neighbors, Turkey and Iran, were getting far ahead of the Arabs, which was not in the Arab neighbors' interest. A/DCM noted that USG officials were using a variation of the same argument with these same neighboring countries.

RELATIONS WITH SYRIA UNLIKELY TO IMPROVE SOON

¶17. (C) Regarding relations with Syria, Zebari said he did not expect any improvements before the elections in Syria's policies toward Iraq. The Syrians were anticipating that a number of political figures they were backing, including Iyad Allawi, Salah Mutlaq, and Atheel Nujafi, among others, would do very well in the elections, so the time for any concessions or re-orientation of policy would come later when they were likely to be in a stronger position to deal with a new Iraqi government. He recounted in some detail an abortive effort by the Syrians, through Deputy VP Mohammed Nasif Khairbek, to reach out to President Talabani and solicit his efforts to improve relations between the two countries. Talabani had followed up with Zebari and PM Maliki, and then sent an envoy to Lebanon, entrusted with a letter for Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. The envoy had cooled his heels in Beirut for a week, waiting for a summons to a meeting with Bashar al-Asad in Damascus, but the summons never came.

¶18. (C) A/DCM reiterated to Zebari the Treasury decision to designate Jaysh Rijal al-Tarik al-Naqshabandi (JRTN). (NOTE: We communicated the impending decision to Zebari Special Assistant on December 22.) Zebari described the group as composed of Baathists and Saddam loyalists, taking direction from Damascus-based Iraqi Baathists led by Izzat al-Duri. They cooperate with al-Qaida in Iraq, said Zebari. This group is one of the ones GOI officials have in mind when they accuse Syria of indirect involvement in terrorist acts in Iraq, explained the FM.

JCC, QUINT DIALOGUE, AND RENOVATING THE MFA

¶19. (C) Zebari responded positively to A/DCM's mention of holding the Diplomatic Joint Coordinating Committee (JCC) in late January and said he welcomed the return visit of NEA A/S Feltman to chair the American side. Regarding the Quint Policy Dialogue to be held in Jordan in mid-January, he said the GOI would be represented. Zebari reported that the MFA had made significant progress in renovating the ministry since the August 19 bombings and expressed hope the Ministry building would be fully functional by March 2010.

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